

February 26th, 2003

10:10-11:50 Panel on Water Recycling with Public Dialogue

Public Comments Presented by the Safe Water Coalition:

R “Ray” Wang, Co-Founder

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<http://geocities.com/safewater94065/aboutus/aboutus.htm>

Like many of you today, I come here looking for solutions to our water shortage. We need long-term sustainable solutions in addition to conservation. That's why we strongly believe that the intent of recycled water is noble. The objectives are admirable. That's the genesis of this gathering and why so many hours and dollars are spent touting the benefits. Yet, we only hear about the benefits and we rarely hear or delve deeply into the potential risks. As far as we are told, they are minimal, negligible.

To be clear, I have and always will be a supporter of issues and policies that promote sustainable environments, smart growth, and environmental protections that provide us with a better place for our future generations. Prior to the city of Redwood City forcing a mandate on its citizens, I believed in the concept of recycled water as conceptualized for irrigation. Throughout the entire information campaign effort, we were told there would be no downside (i.e. no risks, no tax increases, no long-term damage.) But, we hardly doubted that there would be no risks, short or long term so we sought second opinions from experts and they told us otherwise. More importantly, the experts we sought had nothing to gain financially from a cost benefit analysis. They were not developers, they were not consultants, and they did not have “hidden” agendas or belonged to related advocacy groups.

We took the extra effort because when it comes to your children, your loved ones, your property values, it's too much of a “forced” risk. Consequently, the reality of having treated wastewater forced onto our residential areas (front lawns, common areas, parks, school yards) was too troubling for not only myself but also our community of 5000 residents and ultimately the 77,000 residents of Redwood City. This is why 9 months ago we formed the Safewater Coalition.

By promoting recycled water projects at this juncture, proponents do so without acknowledging the lack of strong government oversight, lack of assumption of long-term liabilities by promoters, inadequate commitment to health research, and approval of the re-introduction of known and unknown contaminants into our environment. In effect, proponents are asking our fellow citizens to take undue involuntary risks, albeit calculated. I know this is not their intent, yet let me show you why this unfortunately is the reality.

For example, we often hear that there are “stringent” regulations in place like Title 22. Yet, Title 22 has not been continuously updated to be current. The history of similar “stringent” regulations and government oversight like this have shown that it is very possible to have debacles like Asbestos, Lead, DDT, Love Canal, MTBE, and most recently TCE and perchlorate, just to name a few. We ask you to call for tougher and updated regulations on usage. or support related legislation. But to do so, you need adequate scientific research.

Consequently, we frequently hear that all these communities use treated wastewater and it's safe. Great most are in industrial or commercial usage. No worries. You're protected. But in our case, we were going to go straight to the residential areas. Fine, then shouldn't promoters shoulder the burden of proof to prove safety beyond a reasonable doubt? Let's agree that a certain level of due diligence must be performed. It's only our health and safety. So, to put this in perspective, you can't help but wonder how much money is going into long-term health and safety research? What is that percentage for this research versus the amount spent promoting these projects? What prospective epidemiological studies have been put into place? Bottom line: Why aren't we building these studies into our “grand experiments”? Don't you want to know? Shouldn't a group like yours take a stand on

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this and make a recommendation to increase research funding and require this as a component in all projects?

Regarding assumption of liability, will any of the proponents here assume liability for long-term impact regarding health and environment? Proponents all claim it's safety and that it's used in X number of communities with no problems. I challenge them to assume the risk. They ask us to do so with our health and environment. We ask them to back it up by assuming financial liability or contributing to a long-term liability fund to be used for our protection.

Finally, as a society, we produce tens of thousands of new chemical compounds a year. We are lucky to even test 10%, maybe 5%, ok really 1% of these. Granted some of these are micro contaminants and/or at a low “dosage”, but there are those in the EPA and other scientific communities (e.g. pharmacology) that would agree that you can't rule out the additive effects of unknown combinations on our environment. Those additive effects quickly take them back into the concentration ranges of significance. With so many new pharmaceuticals, personal care products, hormones, estrogens, and industrial chemicals known to cause risks in our treated wastewater, what agencies are monitoring these substances? As you know what is regulated today may not cover for years what is produced tomorrow?

Like I said earlier, we are not against recycled water. We're just not convinced we've done our homework or proven to our fellow Americans that adequate due diligence was conducted. All we see are the people who financially benefit lobbying for recycled water without having the safeguards of appropriate and stringent standards, the adequate continuing research funding, and the specter of liability upon those entities that mandate usage. The sheer lack of checks and balances disproportionately tilt the equilibrium towards proponents. Without such safeguards, we are providing inadequate and inconclusive information that only takes away from the spirit and intent of recycling. We may be doing ourselves a long-term disservice in this noble effort. As a task force, act and move forward to recommend more due diligence before these projects end up in more residential areas and usages, especially drinking and irrigation usages. Most importantly, we need to allow local communities to have the choice as opposed to being forced into mandates out of convenience.